DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 545 PS 014 002

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TITLE Redefining the Grandparent Role. Office of Parent Development International Research and Development Reports.
INSTITUTION Arizona State Univ., Tempe. Coll. of Education.
PUB DATE [82]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Continuing Education; *Grandparents; Middle Aged Adults; Older Adults; *Parent Child Relationship; *Self Actualization

ABSTRACT

There is considerable evidence that older people are interested in self-improvement, especially as it affects their status within the family. However, grandparents have been replaced by an array of professional advisors and surrogates. Their loss of obligation has left them with an ambiguous role. Families do a disservice to grandparents by alleging their importance and then failing to use their talents. "Exploring the Grandparent Role," a program designed to support grandparents, consists of 10 weekly sessions for men and women of various ages, ethnic backgrounds, and income levels. Program curriculum components include (1) sharing feelings and ideas, (2) asking better questions, (3) improving storytelling, (4) self-evaluation, and (5) volunteer service. The curriculum also examines customary grandparenting practices that need revision as well as new functions yet to be accepted. (BJD)

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RESEARCH and DEVELOPMENT REPORTS

ED238545

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Redefining the Grandparent Role

by

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PS014002

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Introduction

There is considerable evidence that older people are interested in self-improvement, especially as it affects their status within the family. During recent years grandparents have been replaced by a continuous array of professional advisors and surrogates. For children the consequence of this shift in the source of guidance and care on which parents rely is unclear. But the consequence for grandparents is certain. Their loss of obligation has left them with an ambiguous role. Any person whom others never ask for advice or assistance is deprived of the feeling that his or her experience matters, that their ideas are informed and valuable. Families do a disservice to grandparents by alleging their importance and then failing to use their talents.

Parents have access to self-help books and classes which improve child-rearing expectations (Strom, 1982). Such opportunities are unavailable for most grandparents. Instead they are left alone to wonder: "What are my rights and responsibilities as a grandparent? In what ways can this role be more influential and satisfying? How can I know how well I am doing as a grandparent?" These kinds of questions will persist until norms of constructive behavior are established for grandparents to use in goal setting and self-evaluation.

One way educators can help is by designing a curriculum to support grandparents. This is the approach we have chosen at Arizona State University. Our program consists of ten sessions which are held at a nearby senior citizens center. The men and women who participate without cost in Exploring the Grandparent Role represent various ages, ethnic backgrounds and income levels. Once a week for 90 minutes they come together to learn

about sharing feelings and ideas, asking better questions, improving story-telling, self-evaluation, and volunteer service. In turn each of these curriculum components deserve an explanation.

Sharing feelings and ideas

Sharing feelings is the basis of intimacy. Another benefit of self-disclosure is that it permits us to unload emotions for the sake of mental health. In this connection, grandmothers and grandfathers have much to gain by sharing anxieties, hopes, observations and satisfactions with other grandparents. They need to inform, challenge and reassure one another in their mutual quest to attain a respected role. For these reasons each of our sessions begins with small group discussions led by graduate students who are trained facilitators. To help the grandparents prepare for various topics, the focus questions are distributed a week in advance. This lengthy time for reflection leads to a more stimulating exchange of views among participants. Most of the topics we consider are enjoyable and apply to everyone. An example is the unit on "Parents and Grandparents as Partners" which includes such questions as:

- How do you suppose raising children now is different from your own experience as a parent?
- How do you feel about offering childrearing advice to your children?
- What could be done to encourage grandparents to freely express their insights about childrearing?
- How do you let your children know that they are doing a good job as parents?

Grandparents vary in terms of the problems they encounter (Kivnick, 1982). Some of them live alone while others can still rely on a mate.

Many are separated from their adult children by distance, divorce or misunderstanding. Certain grandparents have complete responsibility for raising grandchildren while others experience guilt for refusing to help with this task. There are also those who wish they were permitted the opportunity to play a greater part in childrearing. A majority of the grandparents we encounter are pleased with their present situation while a few report it to be continuously disappointing. To accommodate a range of personal needs and interests, some of the discussion topics are optional. For example, those persons whose adult children live in another city or state welcome the chance to discuss these questions about "Grandparenting from a Distance".

- What is the hardest part about being a long-distance grandparent?
- What are some things you can do to help your long-distance grandchildren know you better?
- How can grandparents who live faraway from grandchildren better prepare for visits together?
- What are some ways parents can encourage children to communicate with grandparents who live faraway?

Similarly, the topic of "Grandparents and Children of Divorce" may not be relevant for some people but it is considered essential by others who must cope with these sorts of issues.

- How are grandparents affected when their children go through a divorce?
- What new problems will my son or daughter face as a single parent?
- What can grandparents do to help when their children are in the process of a divorce?
- What is the most effective and least interruptive way to communicate with grandchildren of divorce in their new environment?

After each discussion period concludes and group responses are summarized by the facilitators, the course leader presents a mini-lecture about the topic with an emphasis on helpful suggestions.

Asking better questions

The rapid pace of change in America guarantees that successive generations have fewer growing-up experiences in common. Indeed boys and girls today encounter circumstances that are unique in history to their age group. Consequently, adults should learn directly from children what childlife is like now or they enlarge the risk of being ignored as a source of guidance. Even a casual observer of our age-stratified society will note that children are turning more and more to one another for advice. This situation is not likely to alter except in families where parents and grandparents learn to establish a respectful dialogue with youngsters.

As a rule it is suggested that anyone seeking a guidance role should become a good listener. People more readily accept advice from persons who listen to them. But where children are concerned, the greater problem is often getting them to say anything. It has been our observation that few grandparents know how to elicit conversation from boys and girls. Asking good questions is perhaps the most important skill grandparents need for intergenerational sharing. Accordingly, our program teaches methods of questioning which respect the experience of children. For example, watching television together is a common family experience and an excellent way to learn about the impressions, understandings and values of grandchildren. Intergenerational televiewing can be enriched by providing grandparents with appropriate questions to ask youngsters. The resulting dialogue can reveal what children are seeing and what is escaping their view. By calling

attention to details children do not see, grandparents can provide the benefits of a broader perspective (Strom and Bernard, 1982).

The following purposes and matching questions can be used with almost any television program:

- Purpose: Sensing Alternatives
  Question: How would you handle the situation s/he's in now?
- Purpose: Sequence of Events
  Question: What has happened in the story so far?
- Purpose: Value Preference
  Question: How do you want the story to end?
- Purpose: Expression of Interest
  Question: What parts of the program did you like the most?
- Purpose: Evaluating Judgment
  Question: Do you think s/he is making the right decision?
- Purpose: Definition of Terms
  Question: What do you suppose - means?

Improving storytelling

Long-term memory does not decline much as we grow older so it is possible for the elderly to recall events and emotions that occurred many years ago. This is why grandparents have always been a first-hand source of information about the past. The way in which grandparents tell stories depends on their personality and individual style. What matters more than the storytelling method is the story content. Like all historians, grandparents must identify the experiences which most deserve to be shared. This was less difficult for previous generations of grandparents because they were able to spend more time with grandchildren. Today the incidence of family mobility and divorce combine with conflicting child and grandparent schedules to minimize the time available for sharing. It follows that, if grandparents are

to convey certain lessons, they must go beyond the practice of spontaneous storytelling to include some planned storysharing as well.

We commonly assume that grandparents have some responsibility for orienting grandchildren to family history (Sowell, 1981). We further suppose the young are naturally interested in learning about their origins. However, until children reach a particular level of cognitive ability, usually at about age 12 or 13, they cannot understand distant time. For this reason most of the family stories directed to preteenagers should center on the childhood experience of their own parents. In our program grandparents receive lists of recommended story topics and ways to introduce them. For example,

You can get to know your parents better by finding out what they were like as children. Grandparents still remember those days so I am your best source of information. Besides these questions, there may be some others you want to talk about.

- What kinds of things made you proud of Mom (or Dad)?
- What were some of the silly things Mom (or Dad) did with friends?
- What things did Mom (or Dad) seem to worry about?
- What jobs did Mom (or Dad) say they would like as adults?
- What was the worst thing Mom (or Dad) ever did?

The conditions for effective storytelling have changed. Years ago most children were expected to be seen and not heard. They were frequently reminded of their duty to respect older people, an obligation which included listening attentively whenever grandparents told stories. More recently our society has decided that persons of every age group deserve respect (Roszak, 1979). This conviction is reinforced in school where teachers attempt to

promote favorable self-concept - the view that everyone is unique and special. Given this orientation it is not surprising that young people consider events in their lives to be just as important as the events reported by grownups. The resulting behavior can easily be misunderstood - what may seem to be a lack of deference towards adults can also be interpreted as a stance for equality. The right to be heard is fundamental to equality. Thus the experiences of grandparents still deserve to be told but so do the experiences of grandchildren. Our program encourages mutual storytelling because this practice enables both generations to better understand and respect each other.

We provide a list of themes known to interest children at specified age levels. Each of these themes such as dating, school, sports, money, religion, and vocational aspiration are accompanied by questions for grandparents and grandchildren to use as the focus of mutual storytelling. The following questions for grandparents, to be slightly reworded when directed to grandchildren, illustrate the content of shared stories about experiences at school.

- How were kids punished when you went to school?
- What do you remember about life in the classroom?
- What was your greatest fear while at school?
- How did you feel about homework and report cards?
- What was your favorite activity in school?
- How did you feel about your teachers?

Self-evaluation

Grandparents want to think well of themselves. But the respect they desire is difficult for many to attain since it depends on fulfilling a relatively

undefined role. The task of defining a role requires goal setting, pursuing a sense of direction, and periodic self-appraisal of progress toward the objectives. It follows that unless grandparents are performing some specified responsibility they cannot claim to be successful. This then is the grandparent dilemma: they aspire to success but lack a common set of reasonable criteria for self-evaluation. Grandparents need norms of constructive behavior so that their role can become more influential and satisfying (Strom, 1978).

Our method to focus self-evaluation begins with grandparent groups brainstorming a list of the rights they feel are appropriate for persons in their role. These poignant sessions confirm that part of the price grandparents now pay for not having a clearly defined role is the unreasonable denial of certain rights (Malamud, 1977). In general, we find considerable agreement among grandparents about their desired rights. The more important outcome is to help individuals define their own aspirations based on the family situation. They do so by selecting from a list of rights such as these:

- Right to visitation with grandchildren when there is a divorce
- Right to hear from grandchildren when separated by distance
- Right to express personal feelings including childrearing advice
- Right to live one's own life without having to raise another generation of children

This same procedure of group brainstorming followed by individual goal setting is used to assist grandparents in defining their responsibilities. Naturally grandparents are not alone in determing what their relationship will be with grandchildren. But our hope is that adult children will permit and encourage grandparents to assume a significant family role with:

- Responsibility to model the wise use of leisure time including community service

- Responsibility to help grandchildren get to know their parents as children
- Responsibility to understand current childrearing practices in order to participate in family development
- Responsibility to share knowledge of family history with grandchildren

Volunteer service

This component of our curriculum is recommended primarily for grandparents who are retired. To improve in self-impression these persons have to recognize that retirement does not signal the end of their responsibility to society. Unfortunately, many retirement communities do not support the need to continue feeling useful. Instead the residents are led to maximize their involvement with leisure activities. Gerontologists regard this phenomenon as an overreaction to being disengaged from the labor market. During the career years the prevailing attitude is that only a job will validate self-importance. Later, as retirement approaches, the independence to do what one pleases is considered the key to favorable self-concept. The reality is that, however long we live, our obligation to others is what generates their respect for us. As more retired grandparents abandon the claim that they don't owe anyone anything, the younger members of society must decide what it is the elderly can give us and which roles we can entrust to them (Ragan, 1979).

The need to enrich life at the same time we try to prolong it is the goal of various groups which place older volunteers in the community. Perhaps the best known organization is RSVP, an acronym for the Retired Senior Volunteers Program. The men and women who take part in this nation-wide federally supported program want to learn how to cope with leisure time,

how to retain a sense of pride in themselves and how to enjoy rather than resent the years which remain. As Chairman of the RSVP Board in Phoenix for several years, I witnessed the enormous benefits which occur when 800 volunteers a month share their efforts and talents with the community. RSVP places individuals in nonprofit settings such as hospitals, libraries and schools. The grandparents in our program are urged to volunteer their time in schools.

Now that many mothers of school-aged children are employed outside the home, senior citizens have become a major source of volunteers. The advantage for schools and grandparents is worth noting. Recognize that a greater proportion of older people vote than younger age groups. In fact, older people are often the key to whether school board elections pass or fail. Because most of them have not been in schools since their own children attended thirty or forty years ago, the elderly are easily misled by critics who allege that teachers are doing a poor job. By inviting older people into the school, they can observe firsthand the success of faculty and students.

While they are in the classroom, elderly volunteers can perform such tasks as checking homework, listening to students read, shelve books in the library and facilitate discussions in social studies. In return for these efforts, volunteers have much to gain. The stimulation of interaction with children helps prevent loneliness and depression. By directly helping youngsters, volunteers favorably revise the emerging stereotype that old people are a selfish group who want respect without responsibility. For the eighty percent of elderly persons who are grandparents, volunteering at school presents an opportunity to learn more about the age group of their grandchildren.

Conclusion

In conclusion, grandparents ought to have a well-defined constructive role in our society. Before this transition can take place, however, grandparents need access to creative educational programs that help them identify aspects of the traditional role which should be left behind and other aspects which should be retained. A relevant curriculum will also examine customary grandparent practices that might be revised as well as certain new functions yet to be accepted. Significant change can be expected when grandparents learn to show respect for grandchildren and thereby gain respect themselves; when they recognize the need to find out children's views as a precondition for expressing their own; and when they decide to demonstrate a mature concern for others in order to be taken seriously as models. It seems clear that the emerging role will be a more difficult one but the personal growth it requires can also mean the grandparent experience becomes more worthwhile than ever before.

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